

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

RESEARCH UPDATE

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On the Move: Attitudes to Transport in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

There are a number of features of transport policy and behaviour in Northern Ireland which set it apart from the rest of the United Kingdom. Among the most significant is the fact that public transport in Northern Ireland has suffered from serious under-investment over many years, relative to Great Britain. Moreover, there has been much less integration of sustainable transport and land use planning policies in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain (McEldowney, 2000). It is, therefore, not surprising that Northern Ireland has become a very car-dependent society with a higher proportion of people commuting to work by car than in Great Britain (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Autumn 2000; Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2001).

At the same time, 30% of households in Northern Ireland do not have a car; where such households do not have access to good quality, affordable public transport, they suffer from what is known as 'transport poverty'. Yet, the problem of transport poverty is still largely unrecognised in Northern Ireland. Moreover, in 1999, few people were aware of the extent of relative under-investment in public transport in the region. That lack of awareness has diminished somewhat since 1999 thanks, in part, to a major 'Save Our Railways' campaign which was launched in 2000. It was started in response to the revelation that the United Kingdom Government (and subsequently the Northern Ireland Executive) was considering closing most of the region's rail network.

This update draws on results from the 1999 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* and the 1998 and 1999 *British Social Attitudes Surveys* (BSA) (National Centre for Social Research, 1998; 1999) to assess the attitudes of the public to transport issues.

Car ownership and travel behaviour

Seventy-six per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland said they, or someone in their household, had the use of a car or van. This compares with 81% in Great Britain (BSA, 1999). A slightly lower proportion of respondents in Northern Ireland (65%) than in Great Britain (68%) said they drove a car (BSA, 1999).

The impact of demographic factors

Not surprisingly, a much higher proportion of people in the higher social class categories drove cars than those in the lower categories (Table 1). Those in higher social class categories were also more likely to live in households where at least one member had regular use of the car, and they were more likely to be frequent car drivers.

Table 1: Car use by social class

Social class	Someone in household has use of car %	Car drivers %	Drive car every/almost every day* %
Professional /managerial	86	83	65
Skilled non-manual	82	72	48
Skilled/partly skilled manual	73	62	47
Unskilled	58	39	29

* This question was asked only of those who said they drove a car but the figure stated has been calculated as a percentage of all respondents within the relevant social class category.

There were also marked gender and age differences in patterns of car use. Forty-four per cent of women said they did not drive a car compared to just 23% of men. The oldest and youngest age groups were the least likely to drive a car (Table 2).

Table 2: Drive car by age

Age group	% who drive car
18-24 years	57
25-34 years	75
35-44 years	76
45-54 years	70
55-64 years	60
65+ years	43

There was also a difference between those in urban and rural areas in terms of car use. ('Urban' respondents are those who said that they live in 'a big city', 'the suburbs or outskirts of a big city' or 'a small city or town'. 'Rural' respondents are those who said that they live in 'a country village' or 'a farm or home in the country'.) However, this was not as great as one might have expected. While 27% of respondents in urban areas said they lived in a household where no one had regular use of a car, this applied to 12% of those in rural areas. Significantly, 24% of respondents in rural areas said they did not drive a car, compared to 37% of those in urban areas. Fifty-nine per cent of rural respondents said they drove a car every day or nearly every day, compared to 46% of those in urban areas. It is clear from these results that a significant proportion of rural residents have to rely on public or community transport, walking, cycling, and/or lifts from friends or family in order to get around.

Lack of access to bus services

Respondents were asked if there were bus services near their home that linked their neighbourhood with nearby shops and services. The results suggest that Northern Ireland compares poorly with Great Britain in terms of provision of accessible bus services. Twenty-three per cent of respondents said such services were not available near where they lived, while 29% felt that buses stopped 'too far away' from their home. The same question was asked of respondents in the 1998 BSA Survey. Just 10% of respondents in Great Britain said that there were no bus services linking their neighbourhood with nearby facilities, while only 13% said that buses stopped too far from their home.

The problem of lack of accessible bus services is more acute in rural than in urban areas in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, the 1998 BSA Survey found that 16% of respondents in rural areas did not have bus services nearby which would take them to local shops and services. Yet, in Northern Ireland, no less than 42% of the rural respondents to the *Life and Times Survey* said that there were no bus services nearby which would take them to such facilities.

How can the Government influence travel behaviour?

Respondents were asked a number of questions about what measures might encourage them to reduce their own use of the car. The results suggest that there are many measures which car drivers feel would encourage them to use their car less, especially those which would affect the relative cost of car use and of public transport (Table 3).

Table 3: Support for measures to reduce the number of car journeys

Measure	% of car drivers who might use their car less	
	All car drivers	Frequent car drivers (drive car every day or nearly every day)
Cutting in half local public transport fares	58	55
Gradually doubling the cost of petrol over the next ten years	58	58
Greatly improving the reliability of local public transport	56	53
Charging £2 for town/city entry	56	55
Cutting in half long distance rail and coach fares	47	45
Greatly improving long distance rail and coach services	46	43
Making parking penalties and restrictions much more severe	41	40
Charging £1 for every 50 miles motorists travel on motorways	39	38
Special cycle lanes on roads round here	24	23

Paying for improved transport

Not surprisingly, given respondents' views on the current state of bus services in Northern Ireland, there was strong support among all respondents for the need to improve public transport; 57% of respondents felt this was 'very important' while a further 32% felt it was 'fairly important'. All the questions in the *Life and Times Survey* relating to paying for improved transport provision looked only at what people were prepared to do to fund public transport. They were not asked any similar questions with regard to roads expenditure.

Having said this, politicians may well be surprised by the degree of enthusiasm which existed for raising taxes to fund public transport. Thirty-two per cent of respondents said they would be prepared to pay a penny more in income tax to finance improvements in public transport. However, much higher proportions of respondents were in favour of income tax rises to fund improvements in health and education; for example, 51% said

they would be prepared to pay a penny more in income tax to fund local health service improvements.

Most respondents (76%) also supported cross-border co-operation with the Irish Republic on transport, suggesting that they would be amenable to the use of Irish government and cross-border funds for transport measures. While a higher proportion of Catholics (90%) supported this measure, it was also favoured by 68% of Protestants, and only 7% of Protestants actually opposed this idea. There was greater support for cross-border co-operation on transport than on health; 65% of respondents supported the latter measure and 14% of Protestants opposed it.

Certainly, both of these measures found far more support than any of the other proposed means of funding public transport improvements included in the questionnaire, such as doubling the cost of petrol or congestion charging (Table 4).

Table 4: Support for measures to fund public transport

Measure	Support or strongly support %	Oppose or strongly oppose %
Charging £1 for every 50 miles motorists travel on motorways	19	59
Charging all motorists around £2 for entering/driving through a city or town centre	16	67
Halving spending on new roads	13	61
Increasing taxes like VAT	8	75
Halving spending on roads maintenance	8	74
Gradually doubling the cost of petrol over the next ten years	6	80

Conclusion

What emerges from the 1999 *Life and Times Survey* more clearly than anything else is that, when it comes to transport in Northern Ireland, there are the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. There was a clear association between car use and social class, gender and age. Women, the less well-off, and those in the oldest and youngest age groups were less likely to have access to a car or to drive a car than those not in these categories.

All this might matter little if Northern Ireland was able to boast an excellent and comprehensive public transport system. However, the survey data suggest that this is far from the case.

References

- Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2001) *Personal Travel Factsheet 3 – March 2001* (London: DETR).
- McEldowney, M. (2000) 'Planning and Transportation: The Need for Integration' in *Northern Ireland Environment Link Fact Sheet*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 6-7.
- National Centre for Social Research (1998) *British Social Attitudes Survey*.
- National Centre for Social Research (1999) *British Social Attitudes Survey*.
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (Autumn 2000) *Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey*.

*In 1999, the **Life and Times Survey** involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 2,200 adults in their own homes. Half the total sample was asked the questions on transport.*

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KEY POINTS

- Access to bus services is much poorer in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain; 10% of respondents in Great Britain compared with 23% of respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services linking their neighbourhoods with nearby facilities.
- Lack of access to bus services is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, but it is a much more serious problem in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain; 42% of rural respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services which could take them to local shops and services, compared to just 16% of rural respondents in Great Britain.
- There is a clear link between social class, gender and age, and access to a car. Women, the less well-off, and those in the oldest and youngest age groups were less likely to have access to a car or to drive a car than those not in these categories.
- There are many measures government could take which might cut car use. The main measures which motorists felt would encourage them to use their car less related to those which would affect the relative cost of car use and of public transport.
- Most respondents wanted improved public transport; 57% said it was 'very important', while 32% felt it was 'fairly important'.
- Almost one-third (32%) of respondents said they would be prepared to pay a penny more in income tax to finance improvements in public transport.
- Most respondents (76%) supported cross-border co-operation with the Irish Republic on transport; this measure was supported by 68% of Protestants as well as 90% of Catholics.
- The majority (80%) of respondents were opposed to doubling the cost of petrol as a means of funding public transport improvements.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 1999, 2,200 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 449 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey co-ordinator at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.